

## *Chapter One*

Sugar.  
Water.

Cranberries.

In the overheated kitchen of Tanglewood, Charlotte Carter pushed a damp, strawberry-blond curl back with her forearm, then swirled the mixture in her jumbo-sized pot with a long wooden spoon. She stirred clockwise for a while. Then changed to counterclockwise. No matter how she coaxed with her spoon, the cranberries, four bags of them, floated to the top of the watery solution.

Charlotte plucked her reading glasses from the pocket of her floral-print overalls. Cranberry sauce was supposed to be, um, saucy. Not soupy. She set the spoon on the counter, then began digging in the trash can under the sink for one of the tossed-out cranberry bags.

At forty-two, Charlotte had no problem admitting to being a less-than-expert cook. Until this very afternoon she had never attempted cranberry sauce. Surely you were supposed to add something else—an ingredient to make the stuff thicken up.

Flour?

Cornstarch, maybe?

Not according to the directions on the bag.

She gave the mixture another optimistic swirl. Berries bobbed to the surface like persistent plastic fishing floats. Making a simple sauce should not be this much of a challenge. She stirred some more.

Cranberry sauce was Charlotte's assigned contribution to the Ruby Prairie community Thanksgiving meal. It was her church's turn to serve as the host congregation. She had to come through. For Lighted Way. For the community.

For Jock?

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. . . .*

Through the small-town grapevine, Charlotte knew it was to the delight of Ruby Prairie matchmakers that she and Pastor Jock Masters had been out on three dates. Three dates in four months, according to those in the know.

Less than a week ago Kerilynn Bell, Ruby Prairie's first female mayor and longtime owner of the 'Round the Clock Café, had plopped her skinny behind down in Tanglewood's cozy kitchen for no other purpose other than to quiz Charlotte about what exactly was taking her and Jock so long to get this relationship off the ground.

"No offense, sugar," Kerilynn said, "but you and Pastor are neither one spring chickens. Y'all are meandering along like you've got all the time in the world. Time's passing you by."

"Thanks for pointing that out," Charlotte said. "Perhaps I should look into booking a room out at New Energy. I hear the food's good and they have bingo twice a week."

Kerilynn let the comment slide. "You two are perfect for each other. Single. Attractive. Intelligent. Near the same age."

"Still have our own teeth . . ."

"Terrible waste, not taking advantage of the situation and getting together."

"We are together," said Charlotte. "We're friends. Busy friends. No time for more than that." She got up to refill Kerilynn's coffee cup.

The truth? Charlotte supposed neither she nor Jock knew exactly how to go about this sort of thing. Were they attracted to each other? It seemed so—though they had never so much as shared a kiss.

Most of Ruby Prairie's two thousand citizens knew at least something about Charlotte's story. After losing J.D., her husband of twenty years, she'd moved to Texas and bought Tanglewood, now home to her and a houseful of troubled young girls.

In a late-night talk out on Tanglewood's wraparound porch, Jock had haltingly shared with her painful bits of his more private, troubled past. His story included a young, hasty marriage, infidelity—his, he acknowledged—the miscarriage of their child, followed by a quick divorce. Even though he knew God had forgiven him every wrong he'd ever done, the memories were still painful.

They both hauled parts of their pasts around with them like heavy, overstuffed bags. She, tender memories and grief. He, lingering remorse, guilt, and the unshakable fear of inflicting hurt again.

Charlotte glanced at her watch and peered out the window at a hard-falling rain. Three o'clock. In ten minutes she'd need to leave for school to pick up the girls. They shouldn't walk home on a nasty day like this. Could she leave the sauce and come back to it, or was it like a cake, where once you got it started, you had to see it through?

She turned from the pot on the stove to phone Ginger Collins next door, one of Ruby Prairie's most sensible cooks. Shifting her

weight from one white-socked foot to the other, Charlotte twirled the phone cord around her slim wrist.

"Sorry to bother you, Ginger. I'm making the cranberry sauce for tomorrow night's dinner, and something's not right."

"Oh, honey," Ginger said, "you didn't have to go to the trouble of cooking all that up. Canned from Rick's Grocery would do fine."

Charlotte picked at the cuticle of a nail-bitten hand. "I was going to do just that, but Kerilynn said everybody likes the whole berry kind. All Rick's had was jellied. Nomie was in the store, and she said cooking it from scratch was easy. But I must have done something wrong."

"Nomie's right. Nothing to it. Just a little sugar and water. You probably don't have your fire up hot enough. Honey, I'll come right over, but you've got to be patient. Keep stirring. Let your sauce come to a slow boil."

Pop. Pop.

POP!

Charlotte turned back to the stove. "Ginger, is it supposed to—?"

As if on cue, hot cranberries began exploding wildly, sending airborne spurts of fuchsia goo all over the stove. Charlotte stood frozen to the floor as the boiling mass rose higher and higher until it began cascading over the sides of the pot like flowing lava. Acrid, burned-sugar smoke rose from the red-hot burner, setting off the kitchen smoke detector.

"Oh my!" said Charlotte. "Ginger, I've gotta go."